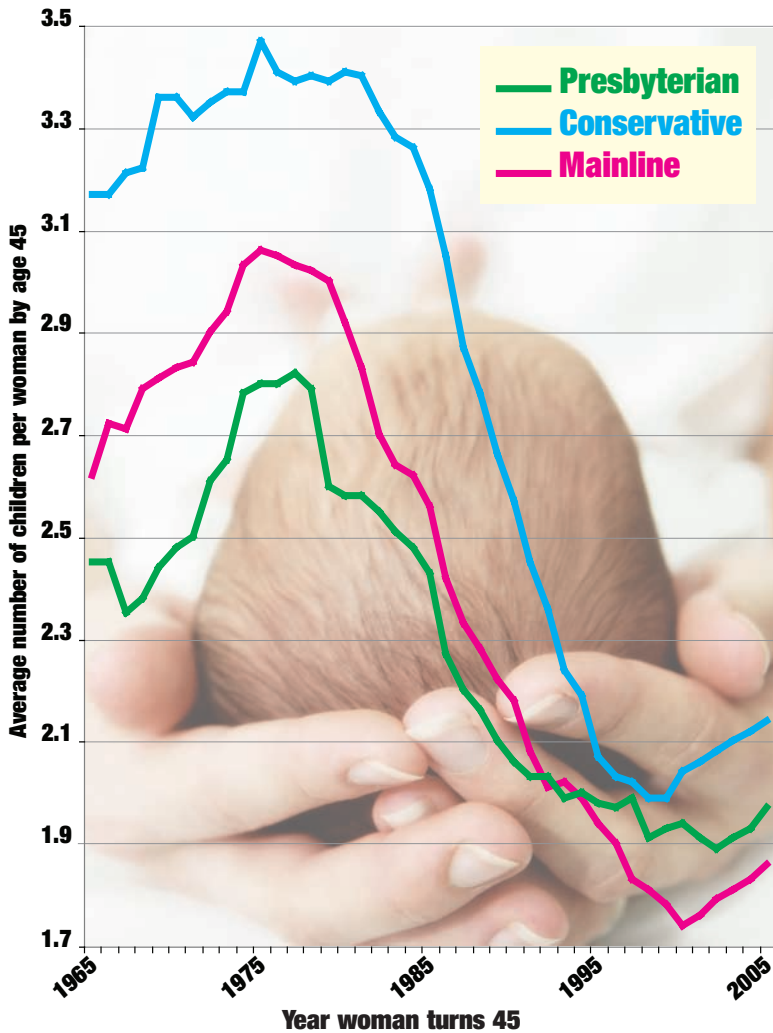


# GO FIGURE

JACK MARCUM



SOURCE: MAINLINE AND CONSERVATIVE DATA PROVIDED BY MICHAEL HOUT; PRESBYTERIAN DATA FROM PRESBYTERIAN PANEL SURVEYS 1984-2005

GRAPHICS BY KATE ANYAN ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/ALISON CONKLIN

## What the research shows

Research concludes that much of the shift in the relative sizes of conservative and mainline bodies in recent decades resulted from differences in birth rates. While the gap narrowed considerably by the late 1990s, in recent years it has widened again and shows no sign of convergence. In short, childbearing trends point toward further sidelining of the mainline for the foreseeable future.

There seems little the Presbyterian Church and other mainline denominations can do to reverse the pattern. No one would seriously consider asking Presbyterians to have or adopt more children for the sake of church “market share.”

The main other option—trying to convince more conservative Protestants to switch to mainline congregations—runs counter to mainline preferences for cooperation and ecumenism and, in any event, would likely have little or no impact since the historical trend is for less switching of this type.

That leaves evangelism among the unchurched, something most Presbyterians avoid, according to our research. But if we want the church to grow, that path, however challenging, must be emphasized. Besides, isn’t proclaiming the gospel something we should be doing more of anyway? □

\*Michael Hout, Andrew Greeley, & Melissa Wilde. “The Birth Dearth,” *Christian Century*, Oct. 5, 2005.

## Birth dearth and mainline decline

In the 1950s more than 60 percent of Protestants belonged to a mainline denomination. Forty years later only 40 percent did so. What happened? Research by three respected sociologists\* concludes that more than 70 percent of the shift in the relative sizes of conservative and mainline bodies resulted from differences in the number of births per family.

Looking at the numbers of children women have borne by the time they reached their 45th birthdays, we find that despite considerable ups and downs in childbearing totals, conservative Protestants have averaged more children than mainline Protestants in general—and Presbyterians in particular—for every year between 1965 and 2005 (women born between 1920 and 1960).

Comparing childbearing totals across these groups shows:

- **The difference was greatest in the mid-1980s**, when conservatives averaged 0.7 more children than the mainline.
- **The difference was smallest in the mid-1990s**, when the gap was 0.2 child per woman.
- **The gap increased slightly in recent years**, to 0.3 child in 2005.
- **Presbyterian childbearing has slowly converged with and surpassed the mainline average**, and currently averages 0.1 child more than the mainline overall.

Jack Marcum is associate for survey research, Research Services, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Louisville, Ky.